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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes a south Asian custom of decision-making and a western custom of decision-making. It then describes by example the meeting of these customs, based on traditional philosophies (one supporting an entire family group, the other leaving a person to function individually and independently), when a newcomer (an Indian male graduate student) from the family-oriented philosophy enters a host culture of the individual and independent philosophy. Finally, the paper highlights approaches which newcomers and hosts can make to adapt to the other culture by listening to the meaning of the spirit of the other. (Contains 32 references.) (Author/RS)

THE MULTICULTURAL FACTOR IN MAKING DECISIONS

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ABSTRACT

In the "Multicultural Factor in Making Decisions" the author summarizes a south Asian custom of decision-making and a western custom of decision-making. She then describes by example the meeting of these customs, based on traditional philosophies (one supporting an entire family group, the other leaving a person to function individually and independently), when a newcomer from the family-oriented philosophy enters a host culture of the individual and independent philosophy. Finally, the author highlights approaches which newcomers and hosts can make to adapt to the other culture by listening to the meaning of the spirit of the other.

DECISION-MAKING: INDIVIDUAL OR FAMILY GROUP?

An overseas telephone call today takes no longer than a call from the east coast to the west coast. There is a difference, though: just before the first ring, one can hear the sound of the ocean gently rolling over the cable; and, although it is a soft, lulling sound, it does not go away until one disconnects the line. The speed of air flight brings us quickly to one another's place of business or home. You can call someone on another continent at midnight and shake hands with or bow to the same person at noon. The ability of people of Earth to make such contacts with one another brings new ways of living, of conducting everyday life to both the newcomers and the members of the host culture.

As newcomers and host culture members intertwine their lives with one another, they discover the interesting, wonderful things that each believes and does. At the same time, they also come face-to-face with the strange, bewildering beliefs and actions of one another. Fortunately, as human beings, we have a core of similar customs or behaviors (Porter and Samovar, 1988); but sometimes the other person's comments seem strange or pointless because their communication is based on philosophy and customs very different from our own.

One of the customs that people may find different is the decision-making process. Oftentimes, decision-makers view a situation or problem, explore the alternatives and their possible outcomes, select the most suitable alternative, and act on that selection. One's view of the situation or problem and review of the alternatives may be colored by the traditions and philosophy with which one has

grown to adulthood. Such traditions and philosophy do not change when one moves to another country. They remain part of him or her even though language, use of modern devices (MACS, robotics, microwaves, et al.) and style of apparel adapt to the host culture. Casual greetings and outward behaviors seem like everyone else's; but the motivation to action may still be derived from the philosophical perspective of one's original culture. Indeed, the decisions that one makes may be affected by his or her choice to make an independent, individual decision or a collectivistic decision which considers all members of the family and their needs.

For this purpose we may explore one (of many) South Asian perspectives and its impact in an American university system.

A TRADITIONAL SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

The view that one has of life, of self, of others, and or relationships can greatly influence the way he or she relates to others. If the person functions alone, then he or she makes decisions based on what will benefit him or her; but if a person functions as part of a collectivistic system then that individual makes decisions based on what is best for the group (even at the risk of doing without fulfillment of his or her personal desires).

An Indian perspective described in "Conflict Resolution between Parents and Children: A Cross-Cultural Study" (Waxwood, 1981) suggests that on-going conflicts are the result of jealousy or excessive pride, and a sign of immaturity. The mature person recognizes that one event in one's life is not vital to the purpose of life or equal to the relationship with a loved family member. Thus the mature person is likely to make a decision to let the persistent individual have his or her way rather

than spoil a relationship just to satisfy pride and have one's way for today. Furthermore, the mature person has concern for the happiness of other family members and acts in a way that fosters that happiness. One is a part of the family group and takes action based on what is perceived as good for the family and as fostering the happiness of the family members.

At first, description of this process may sound like a chance for the strong and persistent to overpower the weak; but when children grow up in a home in which parents and siblings act for the good of the family, they choose to behave in a similar way. The giving of one family member is rewarded at another time by others, who give to him or her. For example, a young Indian couple engaged to marry wants to have their own apartment, which is modern and fashionable for young couples to do; but both understand that the groom's parents will expect them to live in the groom's home, the traditional way. Because the happiness of his parents is very important to both of them, they choose to be traditional and make their home with his parents. After several months, the parents, who rent a home on their property to tenants, ask the tenants to move out. When the tenants leave, the groom's parents, with the help of the newlyweds, renovate the empty home for their son and daughter-in-law (Waxwood, 1981).

Similarly, in an Indonesian family a modern couple has become engaged in the western manner, that is, without parental or *go-between* arrangements. Both go to their respective homes to announce the happy event; but the groom's sisters, upon hearing of their brother's choice of a bride, are very unhappy because they have never liked that young woman. The disharmony leads the father to refuse to give his consent to the marriage (since son and bride would live in his house). The pressing of

the request by the young man does not change his sisters' view or his father's disapproval; so the young man accepts the family decision, and does not see his beloved again. Several weeks pass for the very unhappy young man; and his parents and siblings observe his unhappiness. It pains his sisters to see their dear brother so very unhappy; so they go to their father, urge him to approve their brother's marriage to the woman he has chosen, and promise to welcome her into their home. When last heard from, the married couple is a harmonious part of the groom's family household. Here the son gives in to the family's needs, but concern and love for him lead the family to give way to his needs (Waxwood, 1981).

In these two South Asian examples decisions were made by individuals with consideration for other family members. The Indian couple was concerned about the feelings of the groom's parents and how the choice of an apartment in town may appear to these parents and to their associates. Their decision is guided not by individual needs, but by the needs of the whole family and the desire for continuing familial harmony.

The Indonesian family came face-to-face with western behavior in the independent decision of the young man to become engaged to the woman of his choice without benefit of a *go-between*. His break with tradition seems not to have caused a problem; it is his choice of a bride that appears to provoke disharmony (disharmony that never would have occurred with use of a *go-between*, for the latter would have found out the young woman was not acceptable and the two young people would never have met). The young man, however, has his family as his first priority and, despite his individual pain, accepts the family decision.

Decisions based on the needs of all family members do not necessarily deprive members of fulfillment of their needs or desires, for each member is concerned about the needs of every other family member. It is the reciprocity among them that leads to harmony and guides their consideration for one another in making decisions. This consideration of the family in decision-making does not stop conflict from happening. The "I" is very much present; but it is "I with you", an undivided whole (Jain, 1991) rather than "I" as an isolate, independent being.

A WESTERN PERSPECTIVE

It is important to recognize that just as South Asians will reach decisions in ways other than the one previously described, so, too, will westerners vary their decision-making. Indeed some western executives take pride in soliciting suggestions from their staffs (Goldhaber, 1986) before reaching major decisions (which may have much or little to do with staff members' ideas). Nevertheless, one's ability to make good decisions independently and individually is generally viewed as a characteristic of a strong person.

North American society seems to expect individuals to make independent decisions. Children are advised to "stand on their own two feet" and encouraged/guided to make choices (Faber and Mazlish, 1980 and Gordon, 1975). Because of the relationship they have with one or more members of the family, they may consider family members' needs and perspectives; but western society does not expect this. The individual is important. He or she makes a decision, and announces it to the family members, who may or may not express their views or offer advice. Objections intended to persuade a change of mind must show that an alternative

would provide the individual with a more desirable outcome. To suggest that another's decision causes disharmony in the family, or financial problems for another, or loneliness, or disappointment of expectations is no reason for the individual to reconsider her or his decision in most circumstances.

BLENDING PERSPECTIVES

As you may expect, when people from these two cultures face one another and speak the same language with only minor differences, they are rarely prepared for the differences that may rise later and cause difficulty in their understanding of one another.

The differences in approaches to decision-making could be the source of some interesting conversations. Since the newcomer and the host members use the same language, it is only when reference to the process of deciding is made that both are confronted with their differences. The decision does not highlight the difference in culture; but the communication about the process can set the persons involved in a clanging diversity.

Consider the case of an Indian male graduate student, studying at a university in the U.S.A. He may not view it as unusual when his parents send him a ticket to come home during the Summer, because it is time for him to marry the bride they have chosen for him. He returns to his country and, having no objection to his bride, he marries according to his family's wishes.

The young man's return to graduate school is accompanied by his announcement that he is a married man. American classmates are surprised that he met and married his wife in such a short period of time; but he comfortably explains

that his family and the *go-between* selected his bride before he went home. His classmates, who respect his research in his academic field of study, are amazed at the way he speaks: as if having someone else choose your marriage partner is ordinary (as, indeed, it is for him). From their point of view, he speaks strangely.

The first social event in the department is marked with excitement about meeting his bride; but she does not accompany her husband to the event. Now some of his western female classmates are ready to "tell him a thing or two" about equality of males and females, because he just doesn't understand how society is supposed to be. Obviously, he is a chauvinist, for he seems to have violated host culture mores.

The young man finds his marriage is a source of contention between himself and some of his classmates--and sometimes even of his professors. His culture and his host culture clash, because he speaks from his original family perspective rather than from that of his hosts, and because his hosts speak from their own perspective rather than that of their visiting graduate student. Such a clash causes stress; but from this stress can come growth and success in cultural adaptation (Kim, 1988).

Samovar, Porter, and Jain (1981) note that one's ethnic awareness allows one to realize the subjective view taken of another's cultural perspective and the possibility that a certain behavior may be seen quite differently in the culture of his or her communication partner. In the situation described above, host members and the newcomer seem to have communicated from their own perspectives with little regard for the other's background. Each could ask questions about similar circumstances in the other's culture rather than move toward a judgment of the other and the culture. A gentle reminder from Carl Rogers (1962) advises that our communication should be charged with empathy for the other rather than evaluation. Such judgment of one's

remarks and behavior can be an impediment to understanding the person (Barna, 1976). While host members could do a more positive and accepting job of communication, the newcomer, having lived several years in this country, could make a greater effort to encode his conversation in a manner that suggests that he realizes his behavior is unusual to his host culture. He has, however, just passed a Summer in his own culture and with his family of origin. His willingness to explain and share even more of his culture is, of course, dependent upon the acceptance of his listening hosts (Kim, 1988). Several factors within these two sets of communicators serve to make discussion about decisions in different cultural perspectives very difficult.

The acceptance and support of the host members can help the newcomer to adapt much more easily than non-acceptance. This university situation is especially unique because the graduate student has had a couple of years to adapt to the American cultural system and has experienced the acceptance of his colleagues and professors previously. However, the expectations of society for a single man are different than the expectations for a married man. As single persons must adapt to their new role as a spouse after marriage, he is obliged to adapt to his new role in two cultures. The readaptation to a culture due to a role change may be an area of intercultural communication which deserves some close attention.

In Kim's (1988) stress-adaptation-growth model, the need to adapt to a new role in the host culture may represent the backward motion on the growth scale; but with his effort, and acceptance and high communication competence of his hosts, our graduate student can readapt to his host culture and assist his new wife in her adaptation as well. Kim (1988, p. 169) highlights the responsibility of the host culture rather succinctly:

> The task of the host society should not be to "eliminate" differences that strangers bring because it is realistically not possible, but instead to accept them and encourage them to develop necessary host communication competence.

In his "A Note on the Building of Bridges," Wilbur Schramm identified four requirements for effective communication across cultures: 1) respect the person of the other culture as the human being he or she is; 2) respect the other culture for what it is, rather than for "what we think it should be"; 3) respect the right of people of other cultures to act differently than we do; and 4) appreciate living among people of other cultures.

It may have been the respect Schramm commends to us that led some of our graduate student's female colleagues, female professors, and wives of professors to initiate communication with his wife. They stopped by to visit her, invited her to tea, lunch, shopping; and helped her to enroll in a cross-cultural program for international visitors so that she could learn American ways (e.g. laundry, household purchases, credit, banking, community education, and cultural organizations). Married couples invited the newlyweds to join them (and their family) on little excursions to parks, picnics, church festivals, and similar activities.

Rather than allow the unusual behavior of the newlyweds to lead them into communicating objections about the way he speaks or treats his wife, many members of the host culture listened, and tried to understand the situation, the differences in culture, and the needs of the newlyweds. Close listening and acceptance allowed the host members to understand who these people were, to relate to them comfortably,

and to accept their philosophical approach to decision-making and other behaviors as a different, but not a better or worse perspective.

The decision to adapt or to attempt to adapt to someone whose cultural perspective is different from our own is a decision to listen past one's own personal backpack/frame of reference. If the other person decides to do the same, we may have an ongoing positive experience. Susan Fiksdal reports this kind of effort during counselor/foreign student counseling sessions when the interviewer used ***explicit structure*** in the form of meta statements, rising intonation, tag questions, and *wh* questions. Sometimes the interviewer employed ***implicit*** clarifications, which involve slowing speech rate, stressed syllables and repetition. ***Corrective*** clarifications involved either a metastatement or a negative word. Implicit clarification was observed only with Native Speaker (NS) - NonNative Speaker (NNS) while other characteristics or explicit and corrective clarifications were used among NS-NS as well as NS-NNS. Comprehension checks in the form of tag questions and repetitions raised the question: "Do you understand?" and seemed to meet the counselors' need for checking on understanding. Replication was not only by repetition but by "expansion", in this case, the rephrasing of another's utterance with corrected grammar.

Many of us may struggle to understand and to be understood in the intercultural situation; but on the other hand, Koole and ten Thijue report in the observation of a German medical doctor with a Turkish patient that the doctor, recognizing the foreignness of the patient asked questions that identified symptoms and could be answered by a yes or no. The patient began to explain his symptoms in detail after the first question; but the doctor followed his own pattern of asking

questions in the face of a linguistically capable patient. The doctor adjusted to the stereotype of his patient, but interfered with his own effort to diagnose by not adjusting to the particular patient before him.

Lustig and Loester deal with the organization operating enthnocentrically rather than culturally adapting when the French business welcomes an American business person by providing her or him the best space in the center of the workers' activity (which the visitor may perceive as a mistreatment of her or his status), or the American business welcomes a Japanese business person into their realm by providing an upper floor, corner office away from the hubbub of everyday activity, but perceived as lonely isolation by the new manager. In both cases a culturally sensitive visitor will recognize the situation and probably struggle to adapt. On the other hand, the host culture could have adapted to the visitor.

Decisions in multicultural situations require awareness and sensitivity to the other person's culture and to the person as an individual. The reasoning behind another's decision may be peppered with her or his own cultural and family experiences. Some of us as residents of a selected country adapt our interpretations to the local system but may find our own personal decisions delayed by the awareness of both cultural systems and the inclination to relate to the values of customs of first one and then the other. The decision of how to decide must be made before we provide our final answer.

CONCLUSION

Based on values and mores the cultures of the world have developed various ways to reach decisions. Each culture offers its own reward or loss for deciding

within the mores of the system. Those of us who cross culture lines, whether by choice or circumstance may be confronted with the unusual. We can harden our minds and our hearts and ache from association with the other; or we can open our minds and our hearts to discover the other by listening, to understand the other by listening, to negotiate business or develop longlasting friendship by listening. The hardening or the opening is a decision we shall each have to make--from our own cultural perspective, of course.

The problem of readapting when one functions in two cultures and then changes roles in each (as from single status to married status) remains a circumstance to be further examined in the structure of cross-cultural adaptation.

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